

ON THE CHARACTER OF VOWEL CHANGES IN THE EVOLUTION OF LATIN INTO FRENCH

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The purpose of this paper is to show that Latin vowel changes are included in the important phenomena of the forward movement which includes the simplification of the word by vowel-dropping.

The Vulgar Latin has been deeply transformed in Gaul. The Gallic population could not understand the delicate variation of the Latin language and thus its vowel system suffered deep transformations. We tried to show the direction of these transformations in the oral cavity.

I. INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation evolves according to time and space. When the circumstances allow it, sounds alter very rapidly and the words change to the point of becoming unrecognizable. The circumstances allowing such changes are the absence of any stable authority that would keep an unchanging and uniform faith to the word's original pronunciation.

Correct pronunciation of a word is to give to each of its elements, vowels or consonants, the values that they ought to have. But even people who have studied their own mother tongue following precise grammatical rules, and who tried to pronounce it correctly cannot help modifying its pronunciation according to the climate and the age.

The Vulgar Latin, transferred to different peoples, has undergone many changes as in Gaul. The Gallic population which received Latin tried to adapt it in such a way that everybody could speak it well without any special effort.

In that way great pronunciation-change occurred inside the Latin vowel system. The study of the character of these vowel changes will be the object of this paper. When studying all the situations of vowel changes we can observe that they all clearly aim towards the evolution from Latin to French; the Latin words were changing progressively towards the modern French language by leaving out the unaccented vowels and thus contracting the words and by the forward movement of all vowels except "i".

In classical Latin the vowels were graded by their quantity while in Vulgar Latin the separation was according to the quality. In doing so, contraction of the word and forward movement of the vowels appear clearly to all kinds of changes of the Latin words to the French. These two phenomena can tell us

about the constant changes of the word. We are going to study the two phenomena of the contraction of the word by dropping the vowels and forward movement of the vowels.

II. THE DROPPING OF THE VOWELS

The people, who made French out of Latin, despite making great changes in the Latin words, have kept the basic rules of the Latin pronunciation, that is, its accentuation.

In a Latin word there is always a main syllable which is the center around which the other syllables are gathered. This is the accented syllable and the others are the non-accented syllables.

There were only two places for the accent in Latin : one, on the penultimate syllable of the word if this syllable is long ; the other, on the antepenultimate syllable if the penultimate syllable is short. For example in the word *Romānus*, the accent is on *a* ; but in *dōminus*, the accent is on *o* because the *i* of *mi* is short. From the point of view of the accent, the first word is considered as paroxytone, and the second as proparoxytone.

Besides this principal accent, the first syllable of each word was also accented by a slight raising of the voice weaker than for the principal syllable, which is called secondary accent.

these two principal and secondary accents are sometimes one in such dissyllable words as *māre*, *fūsus*, or in words such as *dōminus*, *nūbilus*, which have the principal accentuation on the first syllable. But they are separate in words such as *sanitātem* or *ecclēsia*.

Principal accent and secondary accent also have persisted in Vulgar Latin and French. This is very important. The phenomena of the vowel-dropping that we want to study depend on this two kinds of accent.

These phenomena had already occurred in classical Latin in which for example *sāeculum* was pronounced *sēc' lum* and *vīncula*, *vīnc'la*. From Latin to French, the predominance of the accent is even stronger. As a result the accented syllables gain greater consistency and the neighboring syllables are reduced or completely dropped out. We are going to examine the phenomena of the vowel-dropping for each of the vowels.

The development of the vowels does not depend only on the accent, but also on the nature of the surrounding elements, because the sound influences one another. So we must distinguish the open vowels from the closed vowels. Open vowels are *e* in *deum*, *a* in *fabam*, *a* in *matrem*. Closed vowels are *o* in *post*, *e* in *presbyter*.

But the closed vowels have a greater consistency than the open vowels. And the changes of the open vowels include those of closed ones. Consequently the changes of the open vowels will be the object of our study.

II-1. Non-accented vowels

a) after the accent

Generally, all non-accented vowels are dropped after the accented syllable, except *a* which becomes *e*.¹

a-1. in the paroxytones

e : *māre* > mer, *fórtē* > fort
o : *véndō* > je vend(s)², *comprehéndō* > je comprend
i : *múri* > mur, *veni* > **vini* > vin(s)
 Final long *u* does not exist in Latin.

a-2. in the proparoxytones

i : *cālidus* > chaud, *clérīcus* > clerc
e : *plantāginem* > plantain, *nóminem* > nom
o : *frigidum* > froid, *divórtium* > divorce
u : *perículum* > péril, *séculum* > siècle

b) before the accent

Following the same rules when a Latin word is long enough to have non-accented vowels between the initial and the principal vowels, these non-accented vowels would disappear.

e : *verecúndiam* > vergogne, *supercílīum* > sourcil³
o : *consobrínū* > cousin, **mansionáticū* > ménage

¹ See III.

² But if non-accented *u*, *o* (see III) has hiatus with the accented vowel, it forms a diphthong.

Ex : *dēum* > *déo* > *dieu*, *pāucum* > *peu*

The same result for an accented vowel which is only separate from *u*, *o* by a labial or velar.

Ex : *jōcum* > *jeu*, *lōcum* > *lieu*
fōcum > *feu*, *tēgula* > *tuile*
pōpulum > *peuple*, *ōvum* > *œuf*

³ The same result applies in the case of a closed vowel.
 The same shall apply hereinafter.

i : bonitātem > bonte, sanitātem > santé
 u : manducāre > manger, adjutāre > aider

III. THE MOVEMENT OF THE VOWELS

We are going to examine the forward movement of each of the vowels except "i" which is pronounced in a more front position than the other vowels.

Among the principal changes from Latin to French, the most important are the phonetic changes. The Latin vowel system is deeply transformed. The opposition of long and short vowels existing in classical Latin progressively disappeared. the barbarians did not make any distinction between long and short vowels.

The classical Latin vowel system of oppositions consisted of five long and five short vowels, for example :

dīco 'I dedicate' pīlus 'a single hair'
 dico 'I say' pilus 'a division of the triarii in the army'

vēnit 'He comes' vēnire 'to be sold'
 vēnit 'He came' vēnire 'to come'

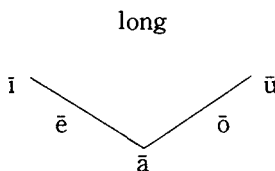
cāsa 'a cottage' lātus 'the side'
 cāsa 'be fallen' lātus 'wide'

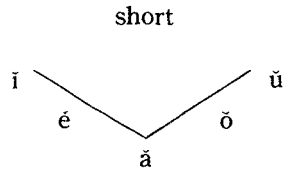
pōpulus 'a people' mōror 'to delay'
 pōpulus 'a popular' mōror 'to be foolish'

cēnsus 'the census' (nominative) acūs 'a needle'
 cēnsus 'of the census' (genitive) acūs 'of a needle'

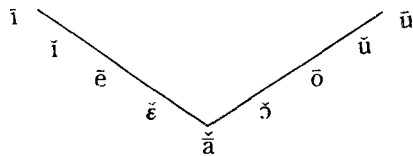
(*ū* and *ū* are the only criterion for distinguishing the nominative case from the genitive case of the fourth declension of Latin language.)

They can be shown schematically as





The long vowels were phonetically close and the short vowels phonetically open.

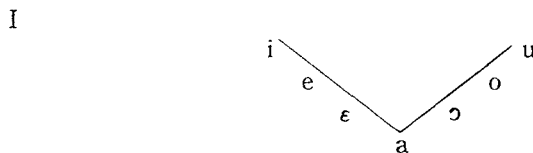


The disappearing of the opposition between long and short vowels came along with a rearrangement of the vocalic tones which is certainly the most important transformation in the history of Vulgar Latin.

Classical	Latin	ī	ĩ	ē	ẽ	ā	ã	ō	õ	ū	ũ
		↓	↙	↘	↓	↙	↘	↓	↙	↘	↓
Vulgar	Latin	i	e[e]	e[ε]	a	o[o]	o	u			

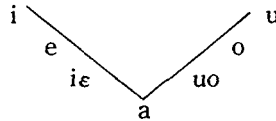
From the above we can see the *ĩ* and *ẽ* become *e*. *õ* and *ũ* are also fused in *o*. Namely, *ĩ* was more open than *i* and *ẽ* was more close than *e*. This set the stage for the fusion of *ĩ* and *ẽ* instead of *i* and *e*. Similarly, *ũ* fell together with *õ* as a result of their phonetic proximity in aperture. On the contrary *ĩ*, *ā*, *ū* remain *i*, *a*, *u*, but *ẽ* and *õ* become *e* and *o*.

The result of the modifications can be shown schematically as



System I becomes system II.

II



These contractions of the vowel system facilitate the forward movement of the vowels.

III-1. Movement of *a*

a) *a* becomes *e* after the accent.

pórtam > *porte*, *múla* > *mule*
dóminam > *dame*, *ínfans* > *enfes*

a goes forward.

b) *a*, situated in the first syllable, does not change before the accent.

amárum > *amer*, *agrēstis* > *agreste*
amórem > *amour*, *valére* > *valoir*

No movement.

But sometimes *a* becomes *e*, when the initial consonant is a velar.

camínnum > *chemin*, *cabállum* > *cheval*
canículam > *chenille*, *capréolus* > *chevreuil*

The palatalization provokes the forward movement of *a*.

c) *a* becomes *e* when it receives an accent.

māre > *mer*, *elātus* > *eleve*
amātum > *aime*, *celāre* > *celer*

a goes forward.

There are several possibilities in this case. But we can observe that in any case *a* goes forward even until *i*.

c-1. in front of a nasal

a > *ai*

Ex : *mānus* > *main*, *nāna* > *naine*
 pānem > *pain*, *fānes* > *faim*
 plānam > *plaine*, *lāna* > *laine*

ai pronounces [ɛ]. *a* goes forward.

c-2. in front of a velar reduced to *y*.

a > *ai*

Ex : *pācem* > *pais* > *paix*, *bāca* > *baie*
 fāctum > *fait*, *lāctem* > *lait*³

The same result as in c-1

c-3. in front of a labial

a > *e*

Ex : *nāvem* > *nef*, *fābam* > *feve*
 lābrum > *levre*³, *sāpam* > *seve*

The same result as in c-1.

c-4. in front of a lateral

a > *a* or *e*

Ex : *mālum* > *mal*, *cālicem* > *calice*
 mortālum > *mortel*, *tālis* > *tel*

The same result as in c-1.

c-5. after a velar

a > *ie*

Ex : *cādit* > *chiēt*, *cāpum* > *chief*
 cānem > *chien*, *navigāre* > *nagiēr*

Velars pull *a* forward more than other vowels. As we can see *a* goes forward in almost all cases.

III-2. Movement of *e*

In the oral cavity *e* is the most advanced vowel after *i*. But it also tends to go forward in the evolution from Latin to French.

a) *ĕ* becomes *ie* when receiving an accent.

hĕri > *hier*, *fĕbris* > *fievre*³
fĕl > *fiel*, *mĕl* > *miel*

When the diphthong *ie* is in front of a velar reduced in *y*, a triphthong *iei* is formed which is contracted into *i*.

Ex : *prĕco* > *priei* > *pri*(*je prie*)
 lĕctum > *lieit* > *lit*³

b) *ē* becomes *ei*.

mĕ > *mei* > *moi*, *sĕ* > *sei* > *soi*
tĕ > *tei* > *toi*, *vĕam* > *veie* > *voie*

In this case *e* goes to the back, but it goes forward with the velar.

b-1. in front of velars followed by *a*.

e > *i*

Ex : *lĕgat* > *lēgat* > *lie*

b-2. after velars

e > *i*

Ex : *cĕram* > *cire*, *mercĕdem* > *merci*
 placĕre > *plaisir* *tacere* > *taisir*

We can believe that this correlation between *e* and *i* is due to the fact that *ĩ*

and \bar{e} are melted into an e in the vowel changes.

III-3. Movement of o

Among all the vowels o shows the most typical changes. \bar{u} and \bar{o} are melted in o . Since then the changes are correlated.

The most impressive aspect of all of the changes is the diphthongization with u after or before o . After that o reaches the final stage of changes.

a) o , situated in the first syllable, becomes ou before the accent.

$col\acute{o}rem > couleur$, $col\acute{a}re > couler$
 $dot\acute{a}re > douter$, $collc\acute{a}re > coucher$

But, in front of a nasal o persists.

Ex : $don\acute{a}re > doner$, $donner$, $rom\acute{a}nus > romain$
 $son\acute{a}re > soner$, $sonner$, $ton\acute{a}re > tonner$

Sometimes o becomes e .

Ex : $col\acute{u}culam > quenouille$

b) o becomes eu when receiving an accent.

We have a most characteristic example of the movement of the vowels. o does not directly become eu without some transitions. The changes of o require the appearance of u which is situated in front of o .

$o > uo$

After $o > uo$, o becomes e .

$o > uo > ue$

ue receives also the metathesis.

$o > uo > ue > eu$

Ex : $n\acute{o}vem > nuof > nuef > neuf$
 $b\acute{o}vem > buof > buef > beuf > b\aeuf$
 $c\acute{o}r > cuor > ceur > coeur$

Looking at these changes, we can believe that *o* advances into *e* making *u* a supporting vowel. But in front of a nasal *o* does not change.

o > *o*

Ex : *hómo* > *om*, *on*, *pómpa* > *pompe*³
 móntem > *mont*, *póntem* > *pont*

The same result occurs before the velars + *u*, *o*.
o + velar + *u*, *o* > *uou*, *ou*, *eu*

Ex : *fócum* > *feu*, *jócum* > *jeu*

c) *o* becomes *eu* when receiving an accent.

honórem > *honneur*, *hóra* > *heure*
nepótem > *neveu*, *sólam* > *seule*

The same result as in b)

But, before a labial, if it persists

o > *ou*

Ex : *lópam* > *lopam* > *louve*, *cópula* > *couple*

if it drops

o > *eu*

Ex : *St Lupum* > *St Leu*

before a velar + *e*, *i*

o > *oi*

Ex : *crócem* > *croix*, *vócem* > *voix*
 nócem > *noix*

As in all cases velars attract *o* forward.

III-4 Movement of u

ū does not change in shape. But *ū*, situated in the most internal position of

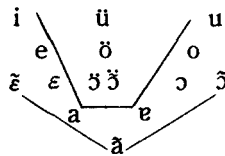
the oral cavity, is pronounced [y] in French. \bar{u} also advances from the velum to the hard palate.

III-5 Modern French Vowels

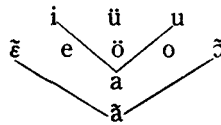
Still are occurring modifications in French that have radically altered the vowel system so that it bears little resemblance to Latin.

Vowel arrangement I is tending towards system II.

I



II



IV. CONCLUSION

In the present study we tried to prove that the vowel changes are included in the important phenomena of the forward movement which includes the simplification of the word by vowel-dropping. Latin was a language spoken by an Indo-European elite. This elite imposed its language on people of various countries whose dialects were very different from Latin. These peoples could not understand the delicate variation of the Latin language and thus its vowel system underwent great changes. We tried to show the direction of these transformations. We believe that these vowel changes show the different transformation of a French word in the past and future.

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